GREEN JOBS

BY CHRISTOPHER DUNAGAN

Years of excessive road building and logging in the Skokomish watershed in Olympic National Forest had a hand in 1,000 landslides, and now teams of workers are trying to restore the forest. Ron Gold (in hat) is guiding some of that work.

Ron Gold stepped briskly down the wide trail, glancing left and right to observe the restoration work his crew had completed in Olympic National Forest in northwestern Washington. Before Gold started the project, this route was an abandoned logging road, rutted and slumping. Culverts were failing, the land was sliding, and winter rains flushed loose soil downstream into the South Fork of the Skokomish River.

This is just one road within one national forest. Yet the story of environmental degradation caused by past logging practices repeats itself across the country.

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For every $1 million spent on restoration, between 13 and 29 jobs are created, according to a study by University of Oregon economists. Restoration is also underway in Montana's Gallatin National Forest (above), where Heather Long, owner and manager of HL Construction, is reading 21 pages of engineering specifications.

Congress is increasing its focus on ecosystem restoration, creating thousands of jobs for people like Gold and his nine-person crew. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack, who oversees the U.S. Forest Service, is committed to it, as well, declaring in August: "Our shared vision begins with restoration." His Forest Service chief, Tom Tidwell, has been widely praised for his restoration efforts as a regional director in the Northern Rockies.

When people talk about creating "green jobs," they're often referring to work in alternative energy fields, such as solar or wind energy. There are also green jobs in the woods, improving water quality, restoring habitat, and muting the effects of climate change. For every $1 million spent on restoration, between 13 and 29 jobs are created, according to a study by University of Oregon economists. Labor-intensive work, such as tree-planting, produces more jobs than heavy-equipment projects, such as road work.

Restoration jobs vary from one forest to the next. During the 1970s and 1980s, Olympic National Forest was part of the wood basket of the nation. Old-growth trees were coming down, and the Skokomish became possibly the most logged-over watershed in the nation, according to Gold, who worked for the U.S. Forest Service at that time. "They were logging on high ground, where they never should have been logging," he said.

By 1990, more than half of the watershed surrounding the South Fork of the Skokomish had been logged. With nearly four miles of road for every square mile of forest, it became one of the most extensive road networks in the Northwest.

Today, with too little money for maintenance, the roads are breaking apart. An estimated 1,000 landslides have brought sediment out of the high country, clogging the Skokomish River and causing frequent flooding of homes and farms.

Healing the Skokomish watershed — from mountain top to saltwater — is the goal of the Skokomish Watershed Action Team (SWAT), chaired by Mike Anderson of The Wilderness Society. The 38 members range from landowners to conservation groups to the Skokomish Indian Tribe.

The road that Gold worked on is a favored shortcut for hikers and horseback riders headed into a darkened forest of giant fir and cedar. With advice from the SWAT, the road was converted into a trail. Gold and his crew narrowed the path, replaced culverts, regraded landslide areas, and planted vegetation.

Until recently, much of this work was funded through stewardship contracting, which Congress authorized in 1999. For the first time, receipts from some timber sales could remain with the forest district and be used to pay for restoration projects that the Forest Service otherwise couldn't afford. Stewardship projects also require

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collaboration among diverse stakeholders—conservationists, local businesses, academics, and timber interests—to design and monitor both the harvesting and restoration work. Between 2003 and 2008, the Forest Service awarded 535 stewardship contracts.

One of the first stewardship projects, the Clearwater Ecosystem Management and Timber Sale, provided for harvesting 640 acres across 6,800 acres in Montana's Lolo National Forest. A local company, Pyramid Mountain Lumber, won the bid. In exchange for nearly $1 million worth of timber, the company undertook a two-year restoration project, using eight subcontractors.

Thinning and controlled burning improved forest health in stands of lodgepole pine, according to the Forest Service. About 50 miles of road were removed to benefit "threatened" grizzly bear and bull trout. The project replaced seven culverts, added 18 vault toilets in campgrounds, restored two miles of stream bank, reduced noxious weeds, and created nine scenic turnouts along the popular Clearwater Loop Road.

"The Clearwater project was one of the first where we started seeing amazing results," said Debbie Austin, supervisor of Lolo National Forest. Because of the high value of timber, the number of jobs created turned out to be greater than in most stewardship contracts — 69 direct jobs and 79 indirect jobs, according to a study by Joe Kerkvliet, an economist with The Wilderness Society.

Although often successful, stewardship contracts can create an inherent conflict, said Bethanie Walder, executive director of Wildlands CPR. "Even in a good market, stewardship contracts do not tend to generate enough money for watershed restoration," she said. And, unless the timber harvest is scientifically justified, "you don't always get a net benefit."

Logging roads remained a vexing problem. In 2007 U.S. Rep. Norm Dicks (D-WA) called for a new "Legacy Roads Program." He chairs the House Appropriations subcommittee that oversees Forest Service spending. "If we do not fix our roads," Dicks declared at a hearing, "we will have to drink our roads — after they slide into our streams." In 2008, Congress appropriated $40 million for the program, upping it to $50 million in 2009. Walder applauds the new spending, saying restoration no longer depends on "extraction" of timber or minerals.

Earlier this year, when Congress passed a new stimulus package to get the economy moving, the Forest Service was standing by with hundreds of "shovel-ready" projects. The agency was given $228 million to repair roads and bridges plus $224 million for thinning and other steps to reduce the risk of extreme fires.

Those investments are creating thousands of jobs, said Kerkvliet. Still, nobody should forget the real reason for restoring ecosystems. "The reason is not so much

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because of the economic impacts," he said, "but because the forests are not functioning well in terms of ecosystem services." ("Ecosystem services" is a fancy name for things like clean air, clean water, habitat for fish and wildlife, scenic views and recreation — things that are highly valued, yet hard to price.)

According to a Forest Service report, one out of five Americans obtains drinking water from sources arising out of national forests and grasslands. In recent years, the Forest Service has been studying how to put a dollar figure on such services. Climate change has added a new dimension. Since trees lock up carbon dioxide, standing timber is even more valuable.

"In many respects, our forests are the lungs of our nation," said Kathy O'Halloran, natural resources staff officer for Olympic National Forest. "They are providing clean air, clean water. Now that the Forest Service is focused on restoration, people in this agency are working very hard to help the ecosystem and make the forests more resilient."

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